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U.S. OFFICIALS SAY LIBYAN THREAT LED TO AWACS DISPATCH

White House Discounts Move,
but Others Cite Reports of
Qaddafi's Attack Plans

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 17 — Reagan Administration officials said today that Awacs surveillance planes had been sent to Egypt because of concern over possible Libyan military moves against the Sudan. They said they expected the planes to remain only a few days unless Libya launched an attack.

In a press briefing at the White House, a senior Administration official, who refused to be mentioned by name, sought to play down the situation in the Mediterranean. But other officials said the four planes had been sent to Egypt because of heightened concern in Washington, Cairo and Khartoum over reports indicating a possible Libyan attack on the Sudan.

The senior Administration official said the decision to send the four Awacs, loaded with electronic surveillance and communications gear, was made late last week by American officials in consultation with the Egyptians. He refused to provide details on why they were sent to Egypt, except to say the move was linked to Libyan behavior. Another official said the request for the Awacs came from President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt.

A 'Habit' of Intimidation

"Libya has a habit, and it is unrelieved for a matter of years, of intimidating its neighbors, and this applies to Chad, Niger, the Sudan and even Egypt," the senior Administration official said. He added that in the last week the situation was "a little more tense" than usual.

Other Administration officials, not connected with the White House, were more blunt about what they said had precipitated not only the dispatch of the Awacs but also the movements of the carrier Nimitz in the Mediterranean.

According to these officials, information was received in Cairo and in Washington suggesting that the Libyan Government of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi was plotting another effort to overthrow the Sudanese Government of President Gaafar al-Nimeiry.

One part of the plot, as reported by intelligence sources, was a Libyan air raid on Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, to take place about a week from now. When Libya began to move some of its Soviet-built aircraft into southern Libya and to bases in parts of Chad under Libyan control, the officials said, the decision was made to send the four Awacs, and their large support group of technicians and communications personnel, to the airbase known as Cairo West.

At about the same time the Navy also had the Nimitz, the only carrier attached to the Sixth Fleet, begin maneuvering away from Lebanon and closer to Egypt and Libya.

Although the Navy has in the past sent ships close to the Gulf of Sidra, a large body of water that Libya claims, the senior Administration official said that this time the Nimitz stayed in waters that were indisputably international and its planes did not fly over the waters claimed by Libya. In August 1981, two Navy F-14's shot down two Libyan planes in the disputed area after they were fired upon by one of the craft.

The senior Administration official insisted that the movements of the Nimitz group were unrelated to the dispatch of the four Awacs. He said the Nimitz moves were normal, peacetime activities, while the Awacs were related to the tensions with Libya.

One State Department official said it was "hard to believe" that the moves were separate, but "enough people have told me that, so I am beginning to believe it."

At Odds for Years

The Libyans have been at odds with the Sudan and Egypt for years. The immediate dispute with the Sudan is over Chad, which shares a common border with Libya and the Sudan. The Sudan supports President Hissen Habré of Chad, who seized power in 1981 from former President Goukouni Oueddei, who is now backed by Libya.

The White House official insisted that the sending of the Awacs was meant as a deterrent to Colonel Qaddafi, to show that he ran a high risk if he undertook any actions against the Sudan. But others said the Awacs had been sent to Egypt in the hope that the Libyans would undertake an attack against the Sudan. They said that with the help of the Awacs, Egyptian F-4 Phantoms could destroy the Libyan Air Force.

A Message of Support

In another development, it was disclosed in Khartoum that Vernon Walters, the former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency who is a trouble shooter for the State Department, had arrived in the Sudan with a message of support from President Reagan to President Nimeiry.

The cover story, agreed to by both sides, was that the Awacs were sent as part of joint training exercises. The dispatch of the Awacs and the movements of the Nimitz became known Wednesday night, however, and there were news reports on television shortly before President Reagan's scheduled news conference.

Administration officials said the White House staff quickly wrote "guidance" for Mr. Reagan in case he was asked about the reports at the conference. The officials said today that Mr. Reagan, while generally aware of the Nimitz's activities, had not been intimately involved in the situation. They said he had formally approved the sending of the Awacs, but again was not involved in the details.

An Air of Nonchalance

At the news conference, Mr. Reagan made some factual mistakes in discussing the matter, and he treated it as nothing extraordinary. His relative nonchalance, whether deliberate or not, colored the briefing at the White House today, with the senior Administration official also trying to depict the events as nothing unusual.

Mr. Reagan said, "I don't believe there has been any naval movement of any kind." He also described the sending of the Awacs as "not an unusual happening" and said "these planes have been there for quite some time in Egypt."

The senior Administration official said the Awacs had arrived only in the last few days.

At the White House today, there was considerable dispute on why the President said there had been no "naval movement." The senior Administration official said Mr. Reagan meant that there had been no special naval movements and, despite reporters' statements of disbelief, the official insisted that the Nimitz's activities had nothing to do with the tensions with Libya.